



Phytochemicals

What are Phytochemicals?

Phytochemicals literally means “plant chemicals”. They are found in all kinds of plants, fruit, and vegetables. Approximately 4000 have been identified but only 150 have been studied. The class of polyphenols, which includes flavonoids, have been studied the most. This group of compounds is responsible for flavor and smell in some foods like garlic, shallots, and onions, and for pigments in foods like cherries, strawberries, and blueberries.

What do phytochemicals do?

Phytochemicals protect the plants they are in from environmental hazards and make them attractive, tasty, and fragrant for humans. Some phytochemicals also appear to have some health benefits. Studies have linked phytochemicals to the prevention of cancer, heart disease, and macular degeneration. However, not all phytochemicals are beneficial, some are toxic (ex. poisonous mushrooms).

How do they work?

Scientists are not sure how the phytochemicals work, but many of their actions may be linked to antioxidant-like properties, disposing of cell-damaging free radicals.

Can I get my phytochemicals from supplements?

Currently, there are many supplement manufacturers that produce phytochemical pills available for the consumer to take. However, phytochemical research is so new, much of it based on animal research, test tube research and theory, that it's too early to tell whether this form will be beneficial. In addition, the possible benefits of phytochemicals may be from the combination of several chemicals in a food and not just one chemical alone.

The Bottom Line

- Consume your phytochemicals the natural way by eating a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Fruits & vegetables are great sources of phytochemicals, try for at least five a day.